

Essays in Philosophy

ISSN 1526-0569

Volume 18, Issue 1 (2017)

Book Review Judgement & Agency

Maximiliano Korstanje
University of Palermo, Argentina

Judgement & Agency
Ernest Sosa. 2015. Oxford, Oxford University Press
ISBN 978019871969-4

Essays Philos (2017)18:1 | DOI: 10.7710/1526-0569.1572
Correspondence: maxikorstanje@hotmail.com



© 2017 Korstanje. This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Senior philosopher Ernest Sosa, who does not need any introduction, brings to us a new valuable book, *Judgement and Agency*, where he explores not only the account of human knowledge, but also its intersection with ethics. Starting from the premise that action, perception and knowledge correspond with manifestations of competence, he adds, individual performance should be framed as intentionally aimed to accomplish a set of preexisting (imagined) goals. This feature differentiates humans from animals.

With this background, Sosa's project is formed in four independent parts, which are plainly stated to inquire how knowledge is produced and negotiated by agency. The first and second introductory chapters review the theory of Davidson and Grice, warning that judgment is not always apt since it may very well derive from randomness. Any action, as well as the performance of subjects, produces effects in daily life which distract from what they planned, while prefixed goals may be involuntarily achieved. Then, Sosa questions the role played by causality which is rooted in rationality, by using modern epistemology (deviant causation), when he writes,

the problem is posed by deviant causation, wayward causation that give rise to counter-examples, whether the analysis targets action, perception or knowledge. Time after time, a kind of luck or mere coincidence derive from deviant character of the causation, incompatibility with appropriate success and relevantly creditable perception, action or knowledge (p 14).

Of course, Sosa understands that cognitive perception involves a teleological goal, which is established by a much deeper cultural system, where sometimes the full-fledged intentions of subjects are ignored. To some extent, current epistemologists and the specialized literature misunderstand the real roots of knowledge. In this respect, Sosa cites some examples that validate the idea that two types of knowledges coexist, *judgmental* and *functional*. While the former is based on an individual or collective affirmation which is aimed at undermining dissonance, the latter escapes human desire. It is interesting to discuss the core of this book, which consists of discussing to what extent we can give credibility to an event thinking it represents the only truth, while on other occasions, we need to doubt the truth even when we are sitting on it. Since performing with full aptness requires knowing what one is accomplishing, such a knowledge used to guide performance should be considered apt. However, not all acts that sound apt, philosophically speaking, come from perception. This is the main dilemma produced in modern epistemology Sosa intends to unpuzzle.

Part II contains chapters 3-5 where the author develops a theory of competence, which means the notion of fully apt performance. This theory of competence, as it was for-

mulated by Sosa, states that aptness sometimes goes beyond human will, in which case, we have to distinguish *apt belief* from *fully apt belief*. Part III, formed by chapters 6-9, dissects the roots of human knowledge discerning the type of knowledge in means-and-end actions from the Aristotelian conceptualization of virtue. Part IV gives an explanation of Pyrrhonian epistemology discussing matters already touched on in the books of human credibility, reliability, agency, aptness and action. Sosa holds the thesis that not only knowledge but also action are co-determined by factors that sometimes eludes causality and reasonability. The concatenation of events, as well as our belief on our possibilities to interpret them, does depend on interpretation.

Sosa is one of the supporters of Virtue Epistemology, which is a philosophical platform that focuses on the significance of intellectual virtues where the interpretation of events is not given by properties of an event, but rather depends on the internal virtues of individual persons. This is how Sosa believes each person develops a proper ethical structure. This book represents a recent attempt to improve his argument in lieu of all the criticism he received over recent the years (an apt belief associated to what is true and what is competent) in which case virtue epistemology cannot be dissociated from the meaning of competence.

Undoubtedly, Sosa's development describes what David Harvey (1989) dubbed "post-modernism," which exhibits a state of knowledge fragmentation, which was originally caused by the decentralization of capitalist economies after the 70s. If this state of decentralization remains unregulated, the concept of reality as a unique and immutable entity broke into thousands of pieces, each one adjusted to peoples' perception. It is important not to lose sight of the cultural project of Enlightenment offered by all-encompassing models of reality; the world of Sosa operates from an allegory of individualism, but tries to construct a new interesting bridge with the lost world of Enlightenment. His obsession to return to Aristotle's legacy reminds us of the importance to understand action within virtue. In this vein, professor Geoffrey Skoll (2014) discussed to what extent the epistemology of social sciences (in capitalist societies) rests on the needs of producing a third object (dialectics) to explain things or otherwise it would not be digested. This type of "fetishism" which allows the center to be marked but in the same action be unmarked, paves the pathways for the exception of law, which is very well conducive to human exploitation. Since the explanation (justification) of our acts always lies outside of our mind, the responsibilities of the elite are endorsed by the workforce, which legitimizes such a state of exploitation (Korstanje 2015). Along this line, I feel Ernest Sosa's book not only offers a valid, smart, and pertinent argument about the possibilities to use epistemology of the Ancient World to overcome the ethical dilemmas posed by postmodernism (without falling into pragmatism) but

also defies the hegemony of psychologism and instrumentalism that are ideologically monopolized by the status quo.

References

Harvey, D. (1989). *The condition of postmodernity* (Vol. 14). Oxford, Blackwell.

Korstanje M. E (2015) *A Difficult World, examining the roots of Capitalism*. New York, Nova Science.

Skoll, G. (2014). *Dialectics in Social Thought: The Present Crisis*. New York, Palgrave-Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137387066>